

# Fox's 24: propaganda thinly disguised as television programming

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5 April 2005

Last week, a comment appeared on the *World Socialist Web Site* describing the phenomenon of "Reality TV." ["Reality television" and the American reality that produces it] There is another genre of network television drama that is every bit as psychologically and socially toxic. These are broadcast television series that openly serve a right-wing political agenda. I am referring to shows like *JAG*, which glorifies the military, and to the ubiquitous cop shows that now regularly top the ratings on network television.

The weekly Fox network television series entitled *24* is an extreme example of this genre. Its propaganda value is revealed in story lines that promote racist stereotypes of Arab Americans and other ethnic groups. Even more politically insidious, this year's season is replete with scenes of torture administered to various suspected terrorists or their associates by US government operatives. *24* offers such stomach-turning scenes every week. These sequences no doubt reflect, first of all, the sadistic imaginations of those producing the program. They are also designed to shock and presumably appeal to the most backward viewers—a politically perverse example of the scenes that characterize a show like *Fear Factor*. Moreover, this systematic presentation of torture is intended to inure the population and convey the message that this barbaric treatment is somehow acceptable in the "global war on terror."

The torture scenes in *24* are obviously based on real incidents such as those inflicted by prison guards and interrogators at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, or carried out by foreign government operatives against prisoners "rendered" by the US to other countries. Incidents and allegations of such torture are now found regularly in the pages of US newspapers.

The premise of *24* is similar to the ubiquitous cop shows that weave unconvincing dramas around the action that takes place in some actual or contrived law enforcement unit in some American city. In the case of *24*, the activities of US Central Intelligence Agency's fictional Los Angeles Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU) form the basis for the show. The show's signature is its unique setup in which each of the season's 24 episodes covers successive hours of one day. By the end of the series, the viewer will have accompanied CTU unit operative Jack Bauer through an entire 24-hour day.

This season, two major themes have emerged in the story lines that serve a definite right-wing agenda. Blatant anti-Arab sentiments that parallel the calls for racial profiling of people of Arab descent or Islamic religious convictions flow from the way the principal characters are presented in this year's season.

A window into the mentality of the series' actors, writers and phalanx of producers and co-producers was on display in an appearance by actress Shohreh Aghdashloo, on a broadcast early this

year of ABC's morning talk show *The View* hosted by Barbara Walters. The Iranian-born Aghdashloo was nominated for an Oscar for her role in *House of Sand and Fog*.

In the TV series *24*, she plays the "stay-at-home terrorist mom" of teenager Behrooz Araz (Jonathan Ahdout, who also played her son in *House of Sand and Fog*) and wife of terrorist Navi Araz (Nestor Serrano.).

Mrs. Araz was one of the most frightening characters in the initial episodes of this year's show. In the series' first back-to-back episodes, she murders in cold blood her son's American girlfriend. With the body of the teenager lying in her living room, she calmly answers the door of her comfortable suburban home and tells the girl's concerned mother what wonderful daughter she has. She has just poisoned the woman's daughter, then shot her dead body in order to cover for her son, who, unbeknownst to his father, has defied his order and refused to do the murderous deed.

Aghdashloo was sent to newspapers and networks to assert that any protest against the portrayal of an Islamic terrorist family-next-door on US television was ill advised. She ignorantly and disingenuously asserted that "although not all the Muslims are terrorists, unfortunately most terrorists are Muslim." She said, "The vast majority, 99 per cent of all terrorists are Muslim." Such statements come directly from the playbook of Zionists advocating unbridled repression of the Palestinian population in the Middle East.

Indeed, representatives of the US ultra-conservative camp have enthusiastically supported the new turn of the prime-time Fox show. Middle East "expert" Daniel Pipes, director of the Zionist Middle East Forum, is one such proponent of the Fox show. Pipes is notorious for founding the Web site Campus Watch, which attempts to identify and attack liberal and leftist scholars.

Pipes's January 2005 commentary in the ultra-right online *FrontPageMagazine.com* centered on justifying the use of a "family next door" as the paradigm of the terrorist cell, claiming most terrorists have always been identified as just such innocent-looking individuals.

He lamented in the piece that "the war on terror had not been the subject of a single American feature film, nor, so far as I know, is there one in the works." He congratulated Fox for "not caving in to Islamists" in its decision to go ahead with airing the show.

The series co-writer and producer, Robert Cochran, revealed the thinking of the show's writers toward this subject to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. He said, in reference to "terrorist acts by extreme Muslim groups," that "we have a legitimate interest in telling stories that are grounded in reality, at least to a considerable extent grounded in reality." In another interview, one of the writers said the

show eschewed portraying homegrown terrorists (he refers to the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995 by American-born Timothy McVeigh) because characters modeled on these incidents would not get the same “visceral reaction” from the public.

Portraying the seemingly normal suburban family as a nest of terrorist operatives casts suspicion on immigrant families in the US and prepares the public for more dragnets of people of Middle Eastern descent like the earlier sweeps in Los Angeles, Detroit, Newark, New Jersey and other US cities. It will surely provide comfort for racists who are contemplating physical attacks as part of their own personal “war on terror.”

Yet, many Los Angeles residents and many other Americans remember just a few years ago thousands of US residents of Middle Eastern descent were lined up for forced questioning by the FBI in Los Angeles and other US cities. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, of the more than 8,000 Muslim and Arab men questioned in the FBI sweeps in 2001 and 2002, not one single person was even arrested as a suspected terrorist.

Following an outcry from Islamic-American groups such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) in January of this year, Fox officials said they would change future episodes to weave in sympathetic Islamic-American characters or favorable treatment of characters of Middle Eastern descent. Apparently bowing to viewer protests, they went beyond their initial promises to CAIR where they agreed to air a few public service announcements. One regular Monday night broadcast of the show was interrupted to present a short statement addressing the issue delivered by Kiefer Sutherland.

The statement consisted of Sutherland reading, in front of a backdrop of the Los Angeles skyline, the following text: “I’m Kiefer Sutherland. I play counter-terrorist Jack Bauer on Fox’s *24*. While terrorism is obviously one of the most critical challenges facing our nation and the world, it’s important to recognize that the American Muslim community stands firmly beside their fellow Americans in denouncing and resisting terrorism in every form.”

In reporting this statement by Sutherland, CAIR continued to warn that “many Muslims are concerned that the portrayal of the family as a terrorist ‘sleeper cell’ may cast a shadow of suspicion over ordinary American Muslims and could increase Islamophobic stereotyping and bias.”

The statement as presented by Sutherland actually contains a not-so-subtle message about Islamic or Arab Americans or even any other Americans who oppose the war on terror and recognize it as a cover for the brutal agenda of US imperialism at home and abroad.

Within the context of the controversy surrounding this season’s *24* that led to the statement being aired, the implication is that those who oppose the action of US police agencies in the war on terror are themselves legitimate targets for political repression.

In *24*, the protagonist Bauer is usually connected to the torture scenes. In some cases he is the perpetrator. In the first episodes, he shoots a suspected terrorist of the leg to get information. He backs up his action by claiming that expediency left no time to use more conventional interrogation techniques. This is a common defense used to justify torture by those who support more freedom for US military, espionage, and even law enforcement forces in carrying out questioning of suspects.

Bauer’s girlfriend happens to be the daughter of the US Secretary of Defense, named James Heller in the show. Actor William Devane plays Heller. She watches as Bauer administers an electrical shock to

her estranged husband, using a crude device fashioned from a hotel lamp cord. When she presents her misgivings to her father, she says that she no longer sees Jack Bauer in the same light—she laments that she thought he was a kind and gentle man. Heller responds to her horror with a brief but chilling piece of dialogue. “We need men like that,” he tells her.

So far in the season, some form of torture has been included in virtually every episode. Early on, the Defense Secretary’s environmentalist son is tortured and left screaming after a type of sensory deprivation using high-pitched noise is administered under Heller’s order. To accompany that episode, the show’s official web site “sources” link contains the following astonishing statement: “Although there is evidence of sensory deprivation in use in the prisons of Abu Ghraib—particularly the hoodings—it is still under debate about whether these techniques constitute ‘severe pain or suffering’ in violation of the article of the Geneva Convention on Prisoner torture.”

In fact, Amnesty International wrote a lengthy memorandum to US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in April 2002, complaining of just such abuses when they were discovered in Afghanistan and Guantanamo. International law and US law prohibits, without exception, torture and cruel treatment of prisoners. By 2002, illegal interrogation techniques were already widespread in Afghanistan. In January 2002, Amnesty International wrote letters to Rumsfeld complaining specifically of sensory deprivation by means such as hooding, restraint in painful positions, death threats, prolonged sleep deprivation, violent shaking, and use of cold air to chill the detainee.

There is every indication that the show’s writers and producers are quite conscious of the program’s potential for shaping public opinion as individuals in the Bush administration come under fire for authorizing war crimes prohibited under the provisions of the Geneva Convention.

According to the series’ co-writer Joel Surnow the first episode aired in November 2001, shortly after the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. However, the show was actually developed and the initial episode shot before the attack occurred.

Only days after the first episode of *24* was aired on Fox, Karl Rove appeared at the infamous November 2001 meeting of Hollywood producers and directors in which the administration called for support from Hollywood for the war on terror. That meeting included representatives from movie and television studios, including the Fox network. Surnow said Fox picked up the show with the enthusiastic support of network owner and media mogul Rupert Murdoch.



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